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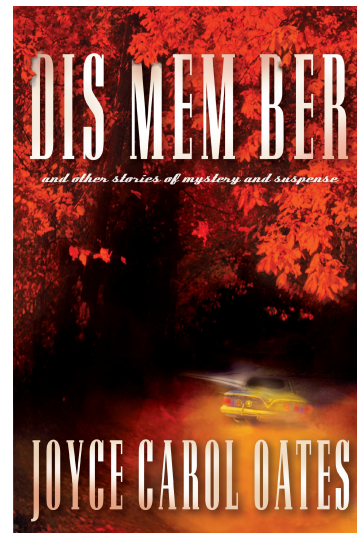
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In recent years, many of Joyce Carol Oates's short stories have inventively mixed psychological realism with genre writing. The tales in this collection unashamedly indulge in tropes from the darkly gothic to suspenseful crime thrillers. Murder and violence are threaded through the stories as spurned lovers and neglected children seek to exact a terrible vengeance. But what makes these intense stories so emotionally compelling is the economically precise way in which



Oates portrays the fractured states of mind of her troubled protagonists. Their memories and recollections are muddled as truth becomes confused by the passage of time, trauma, and an inbuilt desire to justify their own points of view. The title story notes how “Once a memory gets lodged in a brain even if the memory is inaccurate and has been disproven many times it will persist like an ineradicable stain.” Rather than simply regaling with stories of sinister mystery and horrific bloodshed, Oates astutely imagines the way her characters are tragically imprisoned within their subjective understanding of their lives.

The past, with all its suppressed and unheard voices, haunts these characters’ physical reality—from a crawl space in a widow’s former house to an apartment building’s water tank. Many of the characters’ inbuilt sense of compassion, curiosity, or empathy compel them forward into physical spaces and states of mind that their common sense tells them not to enter. Some stories explore more sinister states of desire even when the characters realize the attention or people they want are detrimental to their well-being. Logic breaks down in the face of more debased forms of need as in the story “Great Blue Heron,” where it’s remarked “The rapacity of nature is stunning. Here is raw, primitive hunger. Here is pure instinct, that bypasses consciousness.” This story dramatically suggests there’s a primal nature that underlies all human action despite outwardly civilized appearances.

The framework of Oates's stories often encompass a sympathetic and compassionate point of view paying special attention to psychological details—especially about characters that would traditionally be considered “difficult.” So it's something of a surprise to come to the final story in the collection, “Welcome to Friendly Skies!,” which is sharply satirical in tone. This takes the form of an extended monologue by a flight attendant reeling off rules and safety warnings in a way that can only prey upon the passengers' worst fears. It hilariously mimics the formal and polite babble any passenger is subjected to while waiting for their plane to depart. Rather than looking forward to the journey, all passengers listening to this must brace themselves to launch into a hellish catastrophe and prepare for death. It's both an amusing and cutting rebuke against the institutional procedures imposed upon any flyer. But it also feels quite relevant given the much-publicized United Airlines case where a video of a passenger being violently removed from his seat went viral.

The brevity of short stories allows Oates to indulge in some of her most radical formal experimentation. In the shortest story in this collection, “The Situations,” some children travel in the back of a car which is driven by “Daddy.” This haunting journey becomes eerily circular, repeating itself in varying forms where the father becomes an oppressive and punishing force of nature. It's the kind of nightmarish scenario at which Oates excels, where individuals are forced to face the unresolved

conflict they so carefully try to avoid. Time bends so that it often feels in these stories that though the characters survive their tribulations, they still have to experience them again as if for the first time: “All that will happen has not yet begun.” This collection dramatically teases out many ambiguities of human nature and confronts truth that refuses to remain hidden.